

Primary Point



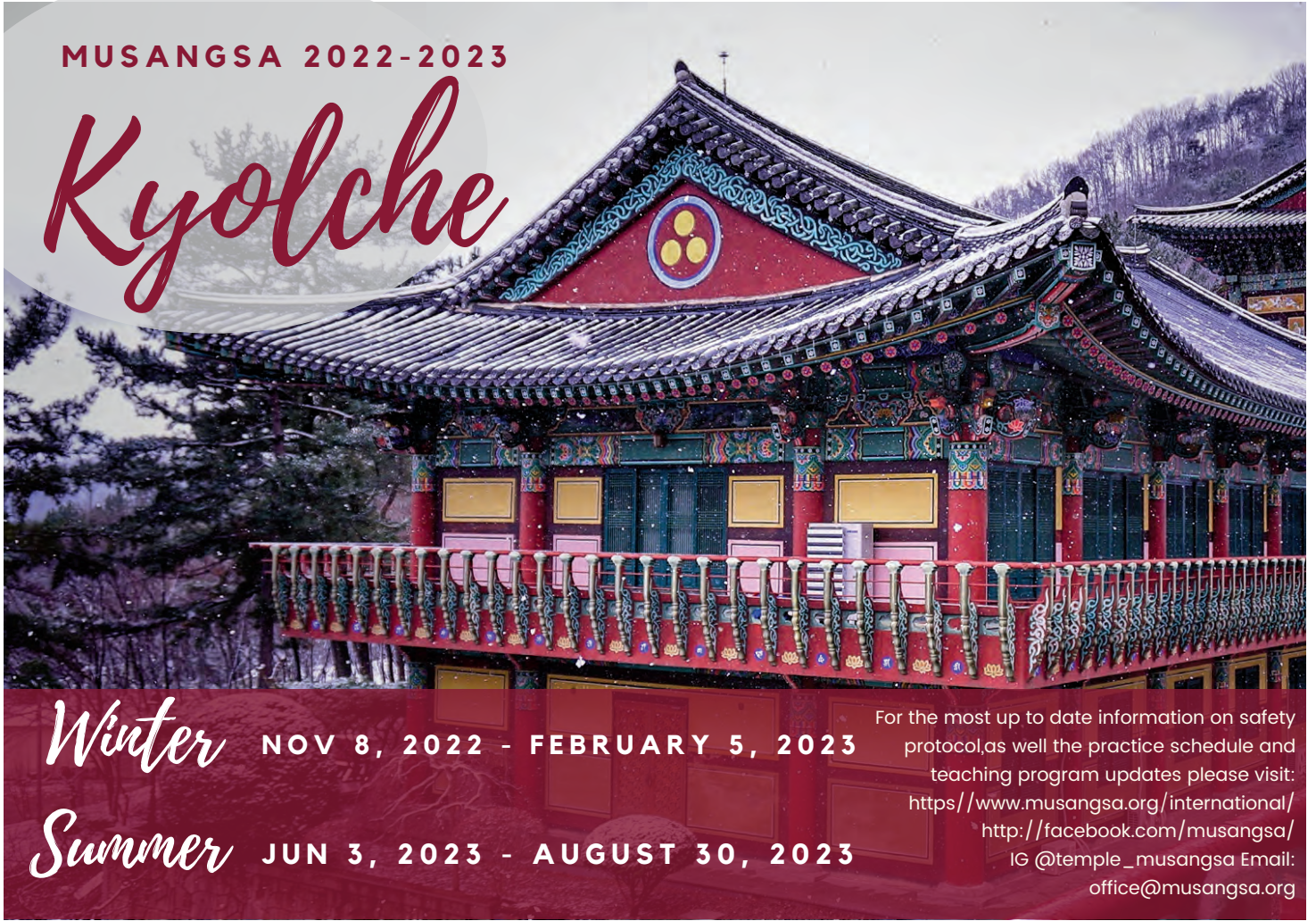
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"WHEN WALKING, STANDING, SITTING, LYING DOWN,
SPEAKING, BEING SILENT, MOVING, BEING STILL, AT ALL
TIMES, IN ALL PLACES, WITHOUT INTERRUPTION
- WHAT IS THIS?"

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The Kwan Um School of Zen supports the worldwide teaching schedule of the Zen Masters and Ji Do Poep Sas, assists the member Zen centers and groups in their growth, issues publications on contemporary Zen practice, and supports dialogue among religions. If you would like to become a member of the School and receive *Primary Point*, see page 31. The circulation is 1,400 copies.

The views expressed in *Primary Point* are not necessarily those of this journal or the Kwan Um School of Zen.

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Cover: Photo of Zen Master Seung Sahn in the New Haven Zen Center interview room, from Kwan Um School of Zen archives.

The Law of Cause and Effect Is Always Very Clear

Editor's Note

Shi Tou's poem "The Identity of the Relative and the Absolute" begins "The mind of the great sage of India is intimately transmitted from West to East." In 1972, this intimate transmission continued for us, with the arrival of Zen Master Seung Sahn in the West. The Kwan Um School of Zen will be holding a series of commemorative events to honor this fiftieth anniversary. We will be recognizing this anniversary in this and the next two issues of *Primary Point*.
—Zen Master Jok Um (Ken Kessel), Editor-in-Chief

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[This article is the text of a fundraising letter written by Zen Master Seung Sahn in support of the establishment of Mu Sang Sa Temple in Korea.]

The patriarchs and eminent teachers have always said that truth is without words and not moving. But in the materialistic culture of today's industrial society, reality is changing so rapidly that "yesterday" and "today" are completely different. People are completely attached to making money and seek freedom, happiness, peace, and equality primarily from the outside world.

But because everything in the world is impermanent, even if people attain what they want, it will eventually disappear. Our modern culture tries to find all solutions only in the outside world. Accordingly, social reform and revolution appear endlessly. Despite this, human beings are only becoming ever more confrontational and hostile, fighting and killing each other, disregard-

ing and disrespecting human life itself. Moreover, they do not even hesitate to destroy the natural environment, which is the basis of their lives.

Though we may call out for world peace, the law of cause and effect is always very clear. Even though we are so afraid of the end of the world, we still cannot awaken to the imminence of our own self-destruction. This is simply because we are attached to name and form.

Bodhidharma said, "In order to enter this gate, simply do not give rise to thinking." Descartes said, "I think, therefore I am." But if I am not thinking, then what? That is the point.

All of us together, therefore, must let go of "I." We must put it all down. Only when we return to our before-thinking mind is it possible to eliminate the confrontation, hostility, fighting, and killing that are destroying the world. If your mind becomes clear like space then it is possible to attain the absolute world. Then everything you see and hear will already be the truth.

Mountain is blue, water is flowing.

The dog barks, "Woof, woof!"

Salt is salty. Sugar is sweet.

This is the world of truth. This is not separate from our true nature. Once we attain our true nature, then we attain our correct life, which also means attaining our correct situation, relationship, and function. This is the complete world—a world of true peace, equality, and freedom. That is Zen.

Zen is not for Buddhists alone. Rather it is a bright ray of hope to restore the humanity of our world, and at the same time it is a compass pointing us back toward world peace.

This dharma came from India to China, was preserved in Korea, and now is being transmitted to America. It is up to all of us now to achieve its fulfillment.

May all beings, at the same moment, attain enlightenment.

In the Dharma,

SEUNG SAHN HAENG WON ◆

If I Had Come Here to Teach People, I Couldn't Do Anything: Memories of Zen Master Seung Sahn

I am tremendously and eternally grateful for his enthusiasm, generosity, humor, warmth and direct pointing to “THIS.”

—Zen Master Soeng Hyang (*Barbara Rhodes*)



Once when I was on a teaching trip with Dae Soen Sa Nim to Poland as his secretary, he turned to me and said, “You know, if I had come here to teach people I couldn't do anything.”

Another time I mentioned to him I wanted to have some more jobs. He said, “That's OK, but I have no job.” I asked him, “Sir, what do you mean? You are a great Zen master.” He replied, “Somebody made me a Zen master, so I am a Zen master. But originally I have no job.”

He'd often say things like this that would make me wonder—as I hope they do you, too.

—Mu Sang Sunim



In 1989 I visited the New Haven Zen Center seeking answers to the perennial questions: What is life all about? What is it that I am not getting? How is it that none of my explanations seem to satisfy me and I become depressed?

Within a few weeks I was invited to have breakfast with Dae Soen Sa Nim, who was coming from Rhode Island. I was startled when in a talk he answered my questions by saying, “Understanding cannot help you.” And that the important questions are “What am I?” and “How can I help you?”

After morning practice the next day we drove in various cars to his favorite diner on Chapel Street, where I noticed he ate scrambled eggs. Afterward, as the new kid, I hung back when he said his goodbyes to the sangha. Then

he made for the door with his retinue of Western monks who were to drive him to New York. At the door our eyes locked. He retraced his steps and came up to me with outstretched hand. That was the most remarkable handshake I ever had. It may explain why I keep practicing.

—John Holland



My first retreat with him, in 1978, was a three-day kido, a chanting retreat, at a house on the coast at Big Sur. I helped him build an altar out of scrap lumber, and he placed on it a beautiful, delicate, ornate golden statue of Kwan Yin. When someone asked him why we were using such an elaborate statue for the retreat instead of a plain Buddha, he replied that Kwan Yin made herself beautiful to help all beings. We followed the standard retreat schedule, early morning until late evening, but instead of sitting we chanted Kwan Seum Bosal for hours on end, each of us equipped with a percussion instrument, and Soen Sa Nim setting the tempo with a huge moktak. Assigned to clean his room during one of the breaks, I went in and found him not resting but listening intently to a tape recording of the previous session, moving his lips. His talks during that retreat were all about the Bodhisattva of Compassion, and the spirit of compassion as the heart of Zen practice. “When you are thinking, your mind and my mind are different. When you are not thinking, your mind and my mind are the same. That is Zen mind. The name for that is Kwan Seum Bosal, Great Love, Great Compassion, the Great Bodhisattva Way.”

—Zen Master Hae Kwang (*Stanley Lombardo*)



My favorite DSSN teaching: “To keep don't-know mind, you must kill three people. First, you must kill the Buddha. Next, you must kill your parents. Then, you must kill ME!”

—Carter West



I recently came across a photo taken by Zen Master Dae Bong of a dharma talk, showing Zen Master Seung Sahn sitting between Zen Masters Soeng Hyang (*Barbara Rhodes*)





Photo: Kwan Um School of Zen Archives

and Dae Kwang. It means a lot to me because I was there at the First Unitarian Church of Providence when it was taken. I can still hear Dae Soen Sa Nim's voice asking "Who are you?" I became his student from that point on and cherish this memory that I found years later. I had a moment of shock when I spotted the photo left at the doorway of the Providence Zen Center! "Who took this picture?" was all I asked of everyone I could find. I must have been standing near the exact spot in the church! That talk changed my life completely.

—Roberta Hoffman

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The *I Ching* and Zen Master Seung Sahn

In 1986 Dae Soen Sa Nim led one of his annual, wonderfully wild and mind-blowing trips throughout South Korea, shepherding a group of us students to astoundingly beautiful, ancient temples in large cities and on distant mountaintops. Most of us were in our twenties, and most of us were sorting out our career and relationship plans. While bouncing in the backs of vans over rough roads, or sitting meditation in open-air halls absorbed in the sound of cicadas, or chanting before enormous buddhas, we were obsessing about what turns our lives would take on our return to the States.

Toward the end of our life-changing pilgrimage, several of us talked about our dilemmas and anxieties about the future. I shared that I had brought along my copy of the *I Ching*, and I would be willing to throw some coins and work out hexagrams to give us a clue about what our futures might portend. (I had been doing this for about a decade in my futile quest to peer into my unknown pathway ahead.) We threw some coins and I read the obscure results in the *I Ching*. One surprising thing is that one young woman got a result and then asked me to throw the coins again for the same question. Amazingly and mathematically vastly improbable, the exact same hexagram appeared. Wanting to share this event and perhaps to show off a bit, we told Dae Soen Sa Nim the story of our discovery.

To our surprise, he got really angry at us. "You don't

know anything about using the *I Ching*," he yelled. "It takes many years of study to become an *I Ching* master!" He paused and looked at us, bewildered and ashamed, and then said, "A Zen student does not try to know the future. You must accept what appears, live don't know, moment to moment! That is enough! Don't use the *I Ching*!" After his teaching, I never felt the need to use the *I Ching* again.

—Rusty Eidmann-Hicks



How Zen Master Seung Sahn's Teachings Made a Difference in My Life

It was the year I turned forty-seven, and I was in the middle of a double major program at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design. I had been in a long-term relationship, and owned my home with my partner of almost nine years. I thought I had finally become settled in my life, clear about my profession, and I would probably not have to concern myself with any more unexpected upheavals.

Yes, I thought I had everything figured out. Until I looked honestly at myself realizing that I was not satisfied and I was looking over what I had accomplished, wondering about some of the mistakes I kept repeating, and asking myself, why? Why was I stuck and worried about my life?

Even though I had spent most of my adult life trying to avoid repeating the problems I had grown up with, they always found me again and again and I kept letting them in the door. A nagging question formed quite clearly: Why can't I see these things coming? I see that I'm in a rut and I don't know how to avoid falling into it when it's right in front of me.

All my life I've enjoyed reading books about spiritual subjects. However, one area I hadn't explored at the time was Buddhism. I began searching for books about meditation and delved into writings by Beat Generation writers who were into Zen Buddhism. Not knowing anything about Zen except what I had read about American WWII veterans in Japan studying with Zen martial artists, I assumed that Zen was a practice for soldiers and tough guys! This seemed to have nothing to do with my questions.

One author, a woman Zen master, gave the easiest instructions for practice, which I followed and used on my own for three years at home. Eventually I knew it was time to find a good teacher, and I continued to look for people to practice with and places to practice.

Again, things in my life took a major downward turn. Another rut that I fell into. Things were falling apart, and I was consumed with anger, sorrow, hatred, and fear. What to do, then? Grasping for something to steady my-

self mentally and emotionally, I spoke to one of the practitioners I had gotten to know through practicing with Zen students at Tae Gak Sa Temple, also known as the Cambridge Zen Center. She invited me to consider moving into the Zen center for a while.

I had been coming to CZC for some time, and at one of the dharma talks, I heard something that struck me. At the end of a talk, the Zen master asked the audience “What are you?” No one could answer. But to me it sounded familiar. I had asked myself the same question years ago after an experience that turned my life upside down, but I never told anyone about it. I thought this question was much too crazy to talk about, to admit to thinking about it.

I took the Zen master’s question and I practiced with it for a long time. It was as hard as a ball of iron, it would not give up its secret. I struggled with it. I have no idea how long I did that before it began to open up. Or was it opening me up? Yes, it was me that opened up. It let me look into the question “What am I?” “What is this I?”

Still my life presents me with upheavals, disappointments, challenges, losses, struggles—those of others’ and my own. Zen Master Seung Sahn’s teaching—about asking a great question, practicing together, letting go of small I, not making distinctions, and letting it all go—doesn’t make problems go away, but it helps me to see how I can meet them with courage and clarity, and also to forget myself and to help others.

—Beth Redmond Walsh



My Favorite Dae Soen Sa Nim Memories

My daughter Mandy was born at home with a midwife right in my bedroom at the Cambridge Zen Center. The next day, Dae Soen Sa Nim came. He was loaded with bags of seaweed and dried mushrooms. He made a giant soup for me like the Korean ladies eat after childbirth. He said I needed to eat it for three weeks and get strong again.

—Dyan Eagles



Other than the highly charged, positive, and direct energy that was Zen Master Seung Sahn’s ongoing manner in the dharma room, where I saw him most



Photo: Phil Zuckerman

often, my most vivid and moving moment in his presence was during some sort of high holy ritual that was unlike any other I’ve witnessed at the Providence Zen Center. I believe it was the very early 1980s, and it may have been a Buddha’s Birthday or Buddha’s Enlightenment Day celebration. In any case, Dae Soen Sa Nim planned a special talk in the relatively new dharma room. He asked that a platform be set up, draped, and topped with a cushion and his big stick—all on the sunny side of the dharma room rather than front and center at the altar. He intended to conduct at least part of the ceremony from this platform and that troubled the relatively anti-authoritarian American members of the sangha. There was some grumbling about this latest request (or demand, as it were) as we set up the platform and otherwise prepared for the special event.

A sizeable crowd of students and visitors settled onto their cushions, with Zen Master Seung Sahn sitting motionless on the platform. His eyes were wide open; he looked at us all, holding us in his mind. He looked this way and that, surveying the room. His bearing, his gaze were nothing less than a call to enlightenment, larger than the whole world. He held the stick high, he brought it down, he brought it up, he brought it down, he moved ever so slowly and steadily. Great love, great sadness, and great strength poured out of him. Looking back, it seems like the temple bell was ringing, but I don’t know that that was the case. It was a moving and inspiring performance, for which I am grateful, by a guy who was the real deal.

A second remembrance is a bit lighter. I was a young new student, nineteen or twenty years old, and practicing evenings at the Providence Zen Center when it was on Hope Street. I had a lot of ideas about how serious this enlightenment business was. I did not want to waste time with my college friends on frivolous activity. A prominent Asian Buddhist teacher was visiting for a couple of days and I asked someone what the two Zen masters did together when they weren’t leading practice. She said that that afternoon they had taken a break from their busy schedule and just sat on a couch together and had a great time carrying on and watching a cowboy movie. This shocked me—I just could not reconcile my idea about how a Zen master was supposed to be with stereotypical, chauvinistic, shoot ’em up cowboy movies. That mental conflict was a wonderful kong-an, as it turned out, for this earnest young seeker.

—Mark Van Noppen ♦

Zen Master Seung Sahn's Campaign for World Peace and His Views on War and Military Service

Mu Sang Sunim

It seems fitting, as we watch the Ukrainians fighting for freedom and independence from Russia, that we revisit Zen Master Seung Sahn's campaign for world peace and his views on war, peace, and military service.

In the early 1980s, Zen Master Seung Sahn was heard to say, "No one is doing anything for world peace, so I have to do it." His method of action was first to host a world peace ceremony at Providence Zen Center in 1982. This ceremony was to be an ecumenical demonstration of the solidarity of religious leadership throughout the United States in support of world peace. It involved religious leaders meeting, talking, eating, and practicing together during the weekend. Among those in attendance, as this writer remembers, were Taizan Maezumi Roshi, head of the Zen Center of Los Angeles; Jakusho Kwong Roshi, head of Sonoma Mountain Zen Center in Northern California; Father Kevin Hunt, Trappist monk from Massachusetts, who to this day leads retreats at Providence Zen Center; Maha Ghosananda, famous Cambodian monk and leader of the peace movement in his country; as well as a number of others whose names this writer cannot remember.

Zen Master Seung Sahn's idea was that if religious leaders could meet and make harmony together, then political leaders would follow. Before the ceremony, he made a visit to the Vatican, seeking to meet with Pope John Paul II. At a preliminary meeting with the cardinal and a Korean bishop in charge of the secretariat for non-Christians, our founding teacher proposed that the Pope come to Providence Zen

Center, along with the Dalai Lama, the head of Korean Buddhism, the leader of the Church of England, and a few other religious leaders; that they take off their clothes, have a hot bath together in the sauna room, get dressed, have a meal together, then depart—the whole gathering being conducted in silence. No speeches, no communiqués, no words at all. Simply a demonstration of together action and solidarity among the world's religious leaders.

As one might expect, this idea proved too novel and too simple for the Church leadership, but Zen Master Seung Sahn did secure the promise of a meeting with the pope, to be held three days later. Unfortunately that would have been at the time of a Buddha's Birthday ceremony at our Korean temple in Los Angeles, so he had to depart and the meeting never took place. But it was a bold initiative, which made a great impression on his students at the time.

In his youth, when Korea lay under the colonial rule of Japan, Zen Master Seung Sahn was completely devoted to the idea of Korean independence, and went so far as to try to join the Korean army in exile in Mongolia. Because of his youth (he was only sixteen) he was rejected, so he returned home to continue his studies at school and later at Dong Guk University. But he also procured a shortwave radio—illegal at the time—so he could listen to the Allies' communications. He was found out, arrested, put in jail, and faced execution. He was saved only through the intervention of a family friend who had some connections.

Zen Master Seung Sahn was born in 1927. In 1945,

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Photo: Kwan Um School of Zen Archives

the Second World War ended with the surrender of Japan, and Korea attained independence. He was, of course, very happy. Soon, however, on the day celebrating Korean Unity against Japan, he witnessed Korean communists and capitalists at the railway station fighting and killing each other. Heartbroken, he said to himself, "Society is bullshit." So he left society to go to the mountains and find his true self. The story of his hundred-day retreat, attainment of enlightenment, and receiving dharma transmission from his teacher, Zen Master Ko Bong, is told in *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha* (Grove Press, 1976). More stories from that period are told in a volume celebrating his sixtieth birthday, *Only Doing It for Sixty Years* (Kwan Um School, 1987).

During the period after his enlightenment, our founder practiced hard, sat several Kyol Che retreats, and learned the ways of a Korean monk. Later, he was involved in a movement by three hundred monks who had remained single to recover the Korean temples from those who had become married at the instigation of the Japanese colonial rulers. (Korean monasticism requires monks to remain celibate, but Japanese monasticism allows them to marry.) He was at that time a leading figure in the Chogye Order of Korean Buddhism.

During the Korean War, which began in June of 1950, he was, like all able-bodied men, monks and laymen alike, drafted into the Korean army, where he became a captain. Although he did not have combat duty, he was nevertheless wounded in action. He never questioned whether going into military service was correct. He rested his precepts and participated in the ordinary life of a military officer. Once, many years later in the United States during the Vietnam War, a student asked him whether he should go into the army. Zen Master Seung Sahn replied, "First you must check, why is your country fighting? If you agree with your country's direction, then you must go. If you disagree, you must refuse."

Our founder often taught, "Any action is not good, not bad. Why do that? Only for me, then not so good. For all beings, then it is correct." This is a rather different style of teaching from Theravada Buddhism, and certainly from our Judeo-Christian tradition. It is, in this writer's opinion, well worth meditating on.

Zen Master Ko Bong had told his student, "Your dharma mission is the whole world." So Zen Master Seung Sahn first founded small temples in Hong Kong and Tokyo, chiefly for the Korean people living there. However, he had heard that some Japanese Zen masters had gone to America to teach Westerners. Wondering if this was really possible, he decided to go to America himself, which he did in 1972. From such small beginnings our Kwan Um School and our whole movement of international Zen began. (Notably, our founder never referred to our style as "Korean Zen" except when he was speaking to Korean people. He told us that he had brought the best things from Korean, Chinese, and Jap-



Photo: Kwan Um School of Zen Archives

anese Zen to America to make a truly new Zen, grounded in tradition but adapted to the modern world.)

He once said, "If I hadn't become a Zen master, I would have liked to become a general." Certainly his qualities of wisdom, leadership, and determination would have suited him well in a military career. The difference, he said, between Zen and the army was in their direction. The army's direction is to defend the country. Zen's direction is to understand myself, get enlightenment, and save all beings. But much of the training is similar. Of course, in the army, one is taught only to obey orders. In Zen, one is taught to attain belief in one's true self and become completely independent, so that someday you can "kill" your teacher. Killing Buddha, killing your teacher, means killing any idea in your mind—very different from military teaching!

So I believe that if Zen Master Seung Sahn were alive today, he would support the Ukrainians in their quest for freedom. Freedom is something he treasured. But it is always dangerous to imagine one knows what our founder might think or do. He was a great Zen master, and therefore always full of surprises.

I hope this article may give newer students, who never met Dae Soen Sa Nim (the title he was called by later in life), some idea of his teaching. For me, he was always an inspiration. Trying to live up to his ideals and his teaching, however, requires a lifelong effort.

*The blue mountain never moves.
White clouds floating, back and forth.*

Mu Sang
Providence Zen Center
February 27, 2022 ◆

Mu Sang Sunim met Zen Master Seung Sahn in 1975 and was ordained as a monk in 1980. He served the Zen master for many years as his secretary, traveling with him throughout the world. He produced the documentary Wake Up! On the Road with a Zen Master, which gives a vivid and rarely seen picture of Dae Soen Sa Nim as he traveled and taught in Europe in 1991. The video, professionally filmed and edited and now restored to its original, high quality, can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gBMBkjhvtR8>. After years of practicing in Los Angeles and Korea, Mu Sang Sunim currently resides at the Providence Zen Center.

Imagine That You've Fallen into Hell Already

Sol Sandperl

A young Dutch man, upon ending some years of training in a Zen monastery in Japan, came to the master to bid him farewell. The master gave him an ornamental Zen sword with the following words: "You have been forged here, just like this sword. The entire planet is a school where the sleeping are awakened. You have been woken up here, enough so that you will never fall asleep again."

And that is what happened at the Providence Zen Center. We were forged so that we can never fall asleep again, and our training continues unbroken in other training centers of life. Zen Master Seung Sahn's words and teaching continue to resonate in our minds and heart, and his work is not lost.

I had first met our founding teacher in New York City. We had perfunctory conversations about various topics. I had no idea what was coming a few years later and how intense his teaching would become when I needed it most.

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It was in the Providence Zen Center in early June of 1980. I had just arrived from Montreal with a small suitcase and a lot of mental baggage. In fact, the mental part had become so severe that I found myself in dire straits, battling for my sanity. Dae Soen Sa Nim was traveling and was away for the first month of my stay. I tried following the schedule, but it was not relieving my sickness. I was in bad shape, I can tell you. Finally, when Zen Master Seung Sahn arrived, I went to see him with the teachers. They said, "This man [me] is social—let him continue working with the schedule and he will come around." Dae Soen Sa Nim looked at me with a penetrating glance and said, "This man needs to go to war with his demons full time. His weapons should be bowing and mantra all day." I agreed immediately. I welcomed a chance to fight.

I began the very next morning, giving myself to the practice full force and did upward of 1,500 bows per day. In between bows, I walked around the dharma room doing 10,000 repetitions or more every day of the mantra I was given (The actual mantra did not matter so much, he would later tell me. It was the concentration on it that counted. You could repeat "Coca-Cola" with total concentration and it would be effective). The closer I got to focusing on the mantra, the more panic-stricken I got. I went to Zen Master Seung Sahn and asked, "Soen Sa Nim, can I do away with the mantra and just do bowing?" He answered with a smile "No, you have to do the mantra also. It is absolutely necessary. Your back-seat driver [your ego] does not want

to give up control. Keep a try-mind and you will soon have success!" With that, he gave me a pat on the back, and I was back at it with renewed vigor.

And it happened that after a few weeks of bowing and repeating the mantra all day—until my jaw was sore—that finally I "landed on square one." The nightmare I was in dropped for one instant, and I realized that all those thoughts weren't me. There was a way out, and the mantra was it. I was still filled with anxiety and still afraid, but I also had an increased desire to go on. I found a path, a technique that would save me, and I was hooked on it. My addictive, obsessive personality worked in my favor when it was being directed in a positive and clear direction—the one that Dae Soen Sa Nim had laid out clearly.

But my demons were very strong and agitated as I was practicing. Now I became afraid of what would happen if I "lost the mantra." Would I fall into hell? I had fallen very far already. So I went to Zen Master Seung Sahn again. I spoke with him often at that time. Whether it was catching him in the hallway or during formal meetings, he always stopped to listen. No matter what. When I told him about my fear of falling into hell because I couldn't keep my mantra, he smiled. Then he said, "Sol, don't worry about that. Imagine that you've fallen into hell already and a demon is beating you. Then just try the mantra 'Kwan Seum Bosal.' Don't worry about getting it, just try it." The advice was a panacea for me. That fear practically disappeared. I knew of course that I could always try Kwan Seum Bosal, and that nothing could prevent me from doing that. The lesson was liberating and helped me along. Dae Soen Sa Nim wanted us to go right into the heart of our imagined fears. It reminds me of the Roman and Greek stoics such as Seneca, who taught that allowing oneself to feel, in sober detail, the worst-case scenario sapped the future of its anxiety-producing power. Zen Master Seung Sahn would tell us to see what our fears are and to go into them. They had no self-nature and were entirely mental creations occurring to an imaginary "I."

A month or so later Dae Soen Sa Nim was giving a talk in the dharma room. He said that fear of death was a necessary prerequisite for those bodhisattvas that had embarked on the journey to enlightenment, and that a bodhisattva's fear of death was intense and immediate and very real. He then said, "Sol experienced this and was very afraid. Now he's strong—no problem." I was grateful to hear him say that. I knew that by *strong* he

(Continued on p. 24)

Carrying Our Bowls: The North American Sangha Reflects on Its Fiftieth Anniversary

Jess Row

In the eighth kong-an of Zen Master Seung Sahn's Twelve Gates, a monk named Seol Bong notices Zen Master Dok Sahn carrying his bowls to the meditation hall for mealtime, even though it isn't mealtime—the bell hasn't been rung and the drum hasn't been struck. What's going on? He mentions this to the head monk, Am Du, and Am Du says, "The Zen Master doesn't understand the last word." Dok Sahn, hearing this, gets angry, and says to Am Du: "Do you not approve of me?"

Do you not you approve of me? That sentence, full of ego and hurt feelings, points to an essential truth about Zen communities—temples, monasteries, Zen centers, Zen schools—namely that, just like all other communities, they're built of fragile human relationships that evolve over time. The challenge of this kong-an is to find out, as Am Du found out, what to say to the teacher to restore the relationship, respectfully but truthfully. In the kong-an, that's the last word.

In life, we rarely find the last word. Something else always goes wrong. Am Du had to deal with a troubled Zen master one morning; later that day, maybe he had to send someone to deal with an overflowing latrine, or help a novice monk who was suddenly homesick. The moment-to-moment work of keeping the practice going sometimes distracts us from recognizing our long-term, continuing obligations to one another. That, too, is part of the point of this kong-an.

A Zen school that has lasted fifty years has seen just about every human experience: births and deaths, arriv-

als and departures, losses and gains, broken relationships and preserved ones. When I realized this date was on the horizon, I knew I wanted to ask those who have been in the school the longest to reflect on how it feels to have carried our bowls (and sometimes others' bowls) all this time. What have we learned about the great work of life and death in a Zen sangha?

In February and March of 2022 I reached out to the teachers and senior students (that is, senior dharma teachers and bodhisattva teachers) of the North American sangha of the Kwan Um School of Zen with three questions pointing to our history and future as a community. Below you'll find a selection of their responses, edited and contextualized.

At the time Zen Master Seung Sahn arrived in the United States, the "Zen center" was a brand-new concept. Fifty years later, what is a Zen center? How has the idea of a Zen center evolved over time?

In 1972, the term "Zen center" had existed for only a decade, following the founding of the San Francisco Zen Center in 1962 and Rochester Zen Center in 1966. The Zen center is an American invention: no one in Asia had ever conceived of a place where Zen could be taught to lay students, unaffiliated with a temple, often located in an urban area, and open to anyone, with or without a Buddhist background.

This accessibility and openness to the public defined the early history of Zen Master Seung Sahn's teaching in the West, where he often spoke to large audiences of curious people who knew next to nothing about Buddhism or Zen. For Zen Master Seung Sahn, this was precisely the point of what he called the "Zen revolution": taking Zen from an elite discipline available only to a small number of monks and nuns and instead making it widely available, with a strong, practical orientation toward helping this suffering world.

But what exactly was a Zen center supposed to be? How was it supposed to function, support itself, govern itself? In the first twenty years after 1972, all of the Zen centers founded by Zen Master Seung Sahn had a robust group of full-time residents and were, in the words of many who wrote to me, "semi-monastic" or "mini-monasteries." "Fifty years ago a Zen

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Photo: Kwan Um School of Zen Archives

center meant daily 5 a.m. and 6:30 p.m. practice, and I mean *daily*,” writes Zen Master Bon Hae (Judy Roitman). “Over time, things relaxed, and we became less attached to that model.” Starting in the mid-eighties, Kwan Um Zen centers began to lose residents as the initial wave of students grew older and wanted to live elsewhere. Today, most centers in North America have a relatively small number of residents, or none at all. (The major exception is the Cambridge Zen Center.)

Why is it that subsequent generations of new students, for the most part, have chosen not to live in Zen Centers? According to those who wrote to me, a number of factors come into play.

Terry Cronin JDPSN writes: “We’re an aging sangha that hasn’t consistently attracted younger people, at least not in the numbers like fifty years ago.” Senior dharma teacher Claudia Schippert writes that “Fewer younger people seem to be interested in or able to live in Zen centers where they would dedicate part of their lives to building and maintaining the center and community. It takes people who want to physically be around each other, and, importantly, who want to be around people they admire and learn from to form a viable Zen center.” Many writers observed that over the decades the Kwan Um sangha has become far more oriented toward retreats than residential practice: “Monastic practices such as Kyol Che and Yong Maeng Jong Jins,” writes bodhisattva teacher Kimball Amram, “have become one of the cornerstones of the Kwan Um School.”

Most Zen centers today, many writers said, function more like a temple (or church) than a monastery: for the most part, it’s a gathering place to practice and share teachings, but not a shared living experience. Terry Cronin adds: “COVID may be challenging us to go even further, to see Zen centers less as places and more as the practice activity of the sangha, no matter in what form (in person or virtual) they have gathered together. Perhaps a ‘Zen center’ is becoming more of a verb than a noun.”

Speaking personally, I envy my peers who had the chance to live as residents in Zen centers when they were younger; I believe residential training represents a kind of full-time commitment that can’t be achieved any other way. And it may be that the rising cost of housing inspires more young students in future decades to choose a Zen community for practical reasons as well a commitment to the dharma. Will those new communities look like the Zen centers of the past? Or will the work of the Kwan Um School become more and more centered on online communities, who come together in person only occa-

sionally? These seem to be the major questions when we think about the Zen centers of the future.

Over the past fifty years, the Kwan Um School of Zen has established a set of expectations and principles about teacher-student relationships. What do you think we’ve learned over time, as a community, about the nature of ethics, authority, and power in a Zen community?

In the 1980s, almost every prominent Zen school in North America, including the Kwan Um School, dealt with controversy involving sexual relationships between teachers and students. Many factors came into play in these stories: close relationships between men and women, misunderstandings of the role of the Zen master, monastic vows of celibacy, and traditions of sexual secrecy. In 1988, Zen Master Seung Sahn apologized to the entire sangha for having consensual sexual relationships with two of his closest students. In the years after his



Photo: Kwan Um School of Zen Archives

public apology, the Kwan Um School of Zen developed one of the first explicit ethics policies in the history of Western Buddhism. A key part of the code was that all major decisions about the school are made by a council of teachers, the teachers group, rather than a single leader. This group (now formally called the board of trustees) has dealt with subsequent cases of misconduct, which in some cases resulted in teachers leaving the school, and in others involved teacher suspensions and reinstatements.

Zen Master Bon Soeng (Jeff Kitzes), who helped formulate the original KUSZ ethics policy, describes its origin this way: “In 1993 I went to a conference of more than a hundred second-generation Zen, Vipassana, and Vajrayana teachers, which was co-hosted by the San Francisco Zen Center and Spirit Rock Meditation Center. On the first day of the conference, second generation female teachers (and many fewer male teachers) began sharing

secret stories of having been in sexual relationships with their teachers. We discovered how much pain and suffering grew out of these relationships. Many of us understood that the American sangha had a systemic problem that required a systemic response.

“When I returned from this conference, I shared my experience of the meeting with our teachers group, and we developed and put in place the ethics policy and grievance procedure of the Kwan Um School. During the almost thirty years since then, there have been grievances filed about both dharma teachers and members of the KUSZ teachers group. Most, but not all, of the complaints have been about inappropriate sexual relationships or non-consensual sexualized touch.”

Reading the reflections of many older students about how the Kwan Um School changed in the 1980s and 1990s, I was struck by how many of them stressed the larger historical transition in American Zen from first-generation Asian founders (nearly all male monks) to second-generation American teachers. “Dae Soen Sa Nim was a very charismatic and powerful teacher,” writes Zen Master Bon Soeng. “His ‘just do it’ direction was so strong. During the early years of the Kwan Um School, he held most of the power to decide the direction and practices of our sangha, and we mostly followed.” Zen Master Bon Hae is more blunt: “In the beginning our model was more than a little authoritarian. People would let Zen Master Seung Sahn tell them who to marry or where to live. We put him on a very high platform; some of us felt he could do no wrong. All of us had a romanticized notion of *Zen Master!* which did none of us any good.” But she adds: “To his great credit, as he got older Zen Master Seung Sahn began putting more and more responsibilities on the people he’d authorized, not wanting the school to be so identified with him that his death or serious illness would cause an existential crisis.”

Several teachers wrote to me of how they were personally affected by these crises in the sangha, and profoundly shaped by the experience. “I was a member of a Zen center that was thriving, exciting, making plans,” writes Rebecca Otte JDPSN, “and sangha members—one by one—left the Zen center because of the inappropriate use of power by the guiding teacher. It taught me so much about the importance of not placing a teacher on a pedestal and of holding a teacher accountable for their behavior. As a new teacher, I’m acutely aware of how my behavior on and off the cushion impacts each person in our sangha. When I became a dharma teacher, I don’t think I really understood what I was doing until I turned around to face the sangha and did a prostration. In that moment, I understood that becoming a teacher was an act of compassion—to be present for the sangha and help in whatever way I could—not a goal to be reached.” Barry Briggs JDPSN adds this reflection on the teacher’s role: “What most students don’t realize is that, in the interview room,

they are actually the host, not the guest. The teacher asks, ‘Do you have any questions?’ and the interview goes from there. It’s alive! But mind makes it seem otherwise. And so power gets confused—teachers are granted powers by students. And teachers, like every one else, like power.” Zen Master Hae Kwang (Stanley Lombardo) puts it this way: “Teachers are no longer regarded as gurus, or much less so regarded, an attitudinal shift that in itself has resulted in a healthier relation between students and teachers.”

Claudia Schippert speaks for several writers who voiced concerns about the limits of the current ethics policy. “Our existing policy addresses what to do when boundaries are transgressed and harm is caused,” they write. “It does not address sufficiently what larger structural issues the school wishes to address, which values to pursue, or where the school and/or its representatives will commit to proactive social engagement that can correct existing imbalances in power and access among sangha members.” They add that “the current sole reliance on teachers for all decisions of the school is probably in need of revision in order to bring in sangha representation more intentionally, and in order to learn more about each other and respond to situations wisely.”

The Kwan Um School in North America began as a school of students in their twenties and thirties who knew Zen Master Seung Sahn well and studied with him directly; but eventually—over the next fifty years—the school will be led by third- or fourth-generation teachers who weren’t old enough to study with Zen Master Seung Sahn or never knew him at all. How do you see the school changing as it passes to new generations in the same lineage?

As Tim Colohan JDPSN writes, “This is the \$64,000 question!” Zen Buddhism in the 1970s was practiced almost entirely by monastics in East Asia and by a tiny number of Western converts; now Zen is an international tradition within the larger globalization of Buddhism. Zen played a large part in the development of the secular mindfulness movement and has permeated contemporary culture in ways large and small. At the same time, traditional monastic Zen in Asia is declining—particularly in Japan, where, by some reports, it is actually in danger of disappearing.

One question that inevitably arises out of this situation is, Does Zen outside of a monastic setting need to maintain its original practice forms? Many teachers in the North American sangha have long been concerned about whether the trappings of our practice (Korean chanting, robes, and terminology, for example) are unnecessarily alienating to potential students, and whether our sangha would be larger if it was more flexible about the practice forms outlined in the *Dharma Mirror*.

On the other hand, one of the distinctive aspects of the Kwan Um School is that our North American, European, and Asian sanghas remain tightly connected, and we have a home temple in Korea, Mu Sang Sa, where Kwan Um

students can connect to the origins of our tradition. Moreover, KUSZ remains intertwined with the Korean monastic tradition, which now extends far outside Korea. While relatively few North American teachers are monastics, the opposite is true in KUSZ's Asian Zen centers. In this way, there's more continuity built into the structure of the Kwan Um School than there is in other North American Zen sanghas that no longer have direct links to Asia.

Does this mean that KUSZ is a "traditional" Buddhist sangha? In the literal sense, yes: our practice forms, leadership, and teaching haven't changed much in fifty years. But this has to be seen in the context of Zen Master Seung Sahn's Zen revolution: the profound historical break with the existing Zen tradition that occurred when he (and other Japanese, Korean, and Chinese Zen masters) moved to the West to teach lay students in the 1960s and 1970s. The Kwan Um School still embodies the radical idealism of Zen Master Seung Sahn's message as put into practice in 1972, summed up by Zen Master Soeng Hyang (Barbara Rhodes) when she writes: "Don't-know knows nothing about generations. Don't-know wakes us up to our Buddha nature, and the rest evolves as needed."

At the same time, Zen Master Soeng Hyang makes clear that the process of evolution is very real: "To me, little has changed," she writes, "except increased sensitivity to power dynamics and racial and gender issues." One of the clearest aspects of the school's present and future situation is a need to pay attention to how attitudes about race and gender shape the Kwan Um community. In the 1970s and 1980s, Buddhism in the United States was sharply divided between traditions practiced by Asian immigrant groups and new schools pioneered by "convert Buddhists," who were almost entirely white. In 2022, these categories have softened but not disappeared. Quite a few KUSZ students today are second- or third-generation Asian Americans or immigrants from Asia (or other parts of the world), and the younger generation of students is more racially diverse than the generation that founded the school.

Nevertheless, the North American sangha—and especially its leadership—remains overwhelmingly white. While there have been efforts to promote dialogue about

race and racial justice within the school, KUSZ Americas (the official name of the North American sangha) has no official policy regarding diversity, equity or inclusion, and visitors to the KUSZ website find no mention of these issues. Senior dharma teacher Christina Hauck writes that she is equally alarmed by the gender ratio among the North American sangha's newer teachers: In the past twenty-two years, she points out, thirteen men and three women (one of whom subsequently passed away) have become Ji Do Poep Sas. Many writers expressed to me a genuine concern that the Kwan Um School risks losing younger students to other Buddhist sanghas that are more explicitly oriented toward social justice.

Colin Beavan JDPSN who received inka in April 2022, writes, "I am among the first few teachers who never met Zen Master Seung Sahn. Ji Do Poep Sas have authority to teach only as long as they are attached to the school; but when my generation starts to produce Zen masters, things will get really interesting, because a Zen master has authority to go their own way. What will happen then? What will be the flavor of the teaching then? I really hope such teachers will stay in our community, but the community of what will be senior teachers will then have a whole different set of references. Also, most have us have a number of teachers, not just one. I think it will be more like jazz to our founder's score."

As a senior dharma teacher who first joined the school in 1994, I still recall the sense of awe I felt nearly thirty years ago when I first drove down Pound Round in Cumberland, Rhode Island, and saw, rising out of the drab fields of an East Coast suburb, Providence Zen Center's Peace Pagoda and dharma hall. The longer I study Buddhist texts and history, the more impressed I am with the strength and sheer bravado of "try mind" energy in the generation that founded the Kwan Um School. But the real question is, always: How can I help? What can I do? ♦

Senior dharma teacher Jess Row is a writer and member of the Chogye International Zen Center in New York City. His second novel, The New Earth, will be published in March 2023.

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Photo: Kwan Um School of Zen Archives

INKA CEREMONY FOR

Tim Colohan

On April 9, 2022, Tim Colohan received inka at Providence Zen Center, USA.

Jason Quinn JDPSN: So I have an interesting question, because you used to be a teacher in the Golden Wind. Is that correct?

Tim Colohan JDPSN: Yes, that's correct: Golden Wind Zen Group.

Quinn PSN: Right, and now you may be a teacher in the Kwan Um School of Zen. And so my question is, Which way is the wind blowing now?

Colohan PSN: You already understand.

Quinn PSN: I truly don't. I'm asking you.

Colohan PSN: It looks like east to northeast outside.

Quinn PSN: Is that the truth?

Colohan PSN: You want more?

Quinn PSN: I always do!

Colohan PSN: The dog runs after the bone.

Quinn PSN: Thank you for your teaching.



Dennis Duermeier JDPSN: Thank you for all your years of practice and dedication. So, you work in the movie industry. I have always wondered, when the lights go down, what's left onstage?

Colohan PSN: You already understand.

Duermeier PSN: I'm sorry I don't. I'm asking you.

Colohan PSN: [*Stands up, walks to the light switches next to the altar, and turns off the lights in the dharma room.*] Is that enough?

Duermeier PSN: No! I want more!

Colohan PSN: The dog runs after the bone.



Mu Sang Sunim: OK, so once you told me that I had “thrown away all of my teachers.” So I ask you, Can I throw away you too?

Colohan PSN: You already understand!

Mu Sang Sunim: I sure do!

Colohan PSN: Throw me somewhere soft please!

Mu Sang Sunim: You've got to take your chances.

INKA SPEECH

[Raises the Zen stick over his head, then hits the table with the stick.]

Broken is whole, whole is broken.

[Raises the Zen stick over his head, then hits the table with the stick.]

There is only no broken; there is no whole.

[Raises the Zen stick over his head, then hits the table with the stick.]

Broken is broken, and whole is whole.

Which one of these three statements is the truth?

KATZ!

We are contained in an unbroken whole of time and space in this moment.

There is a river of gratitude flowing through me at this moment. To the sangha, which has supported, challenged, and encouraged me. To the monks who have inspired me and for the teachers that have helped me every step of the way. Finding the function of that gratitude is what's in front of me now.

I come from the West Coast. People said I should introduce myself a little bit in this talk. I wanted to say, I come from the planet of Los Angeles. I met Zen Master Seung Sahn in 1985 in Dharma Zen Center. And it was a period of my life when I was in a lot of difficult pain.

I come from a big family. I have eleven siblings. Some of them have passed, and my parents have passed. Years ago—some of you know this story—my younger sister Mary Kay. I was in my twenties; she was seventeen. She was at a job interview at a Safeway grocery store. She fell and crushed her skull. A week later, she was dead.



Photo: So Young Lee

My sister was broken. My family felt broken. When I saw my sister's body in the casket, I thought "That is not my sister!" It was nothing like her. This was my first experience of don't know. Where did she go?

At the time, I was a devout Catholic. My whole family was. And the Catholic explanation for this kind of thing, when it came to my grief, was like throwing a hallmark card on a bonfire. So, this was this don't know, and what I call the impermanence bomb going off in my family. And I just want to unpack that a little bit.

Some of the children were three years old. Some of the children were thirteen, fourteen, sixteen years old. I was in my twenties. And then there were a few others older than me. My parents were in their early fifties. Boom. This traumatized all of us in big ways. If you think impermanence is a philosophy, you're mistaken. It's our actual experience. And the way out of that grief is don't know. That grief had a function. And as I said in another talk, "Our broken hearts bled gold," but we didn't know it. We just did what we could do. And that led us to helping each other. And that led us to a deeper appreciation of each one of us. In the face of impermanence, you begin to cherish everyone 100 percent.

My daughter at the time was about two and a half, and my wife was pregnant. I realized later that my toddler daughter could not become a youngster without impermanence. She can't go from being a teenager to an adolescent without impermanence. My daughter now is going to be fifty years old. That's because of impermanence. So, I'll take it. I'll take whatever grief impermanence is going to cause, because it is what gives us this life!

That takes courage. That takes heart. And it means we're going to be broken. We're going to be broken and then the whole is going to unfold and show us what to do.

A few years later, this queer, gay man had to accept his identity and his sexual orientation. And divorce my wife. And leave my children. More broken hearts. Another broken family. The whole unfolds.

My children, who have given me this Technicolor experience of life, were my first teachers in how to truly emotionally connect to someone. And the shocking realization was that I did not have this Technicolor experience with everybody else. It was all black and white. So, my heart broke, my children's hearts broke, everywhere. The whole unfolded.

My devotion to them only became greater. Their devotion to me only became greater. The community threw me out. Called me bad things that had nothing to do with me. The Catholic Church threw me out. So, devotion to a practice was no longer available to me. And I was told how bad I was.

So, I heard Zen Master Seung Sahn give a talk, and it was either the second or the third dharma talk I had ever heard. He quoted the five precepts poem:

*Good and evil have no self-nature.
Holy and unholy are empty names.
Outside of the door is the land of stillness and light.
Spring comes, and the grass grows by itself.*

The top of my head blew off. I had been hearing the "self" was bad or good, struggling with that since the age of six, and I had no idea what the poem meant. But here is this bald-headed man in front of a golden Buddha. I needed to get to the bottom of this. I didn't know how, but I had never heard this point of view expressed. All my ideas about good and bad were broken. I was thoroughly confused. I had no idea what these people were doing. But I was going to try and figure it out.

If we look at this world, it will break our hearts. We have to trust that. That breaking heart bleeds wisdom and compassion. And we have to welcome it in. Welcome in the breaking heart. Zen Master Seung Sahn would say to us, "Put your practice where the pain point is." That idea saved my life.

No matter how unpleasant, we just put our don't know exactly where the pain is. It's the sign. This is "rowing our wisdom boat," yeah? This is an old metaphor. We are rowing this prajna ship, this wisdom boat. This activity of finding the pain point and putting our attention there, our don't know. What is this? Having that courage: that's rowing the wisdom boat. And we don't just do it at a ceremony. We don't just do it on a retreat. We do it all day long. And we can trust that.

The Heart Sutra says: "Avalokiteshvara, while practicing deeply." You are Avalokiteshvara. You are Kwan Seum Bosal.

Look deeply into the pain point, and exactly what there is to do will appear. People naturally find this. My family naturally took care of itself the best it could. So, what appears "broken" is how we become whole. And when we're rowing this wisdom ship, we are going to get tired. Or we're going to be sick or we're going to be in too much pain to row. So, we rest. And somebody else will row for us. When we feel stronger, then we can row again.

[Raises the Zen stick over his head, then hits the floor with the stick.]

This dharma speech is done.

[Raises the Zen stick over his head, then hits the floor with the stick.]

This bullshit speech is done.

[Raises the Zen stick over his head, then hits the floor with the stick.]

The speech I gave and the speech you heard are two different speeches.

Which one of those statements is correct?

KATZ!

The entire world is giving us a dharma talk!

Listen closely, please. And help. ♦

INKA CEREMONY FOR

Colin Beavan

On April 9, 2022, Colin Beavan received inka at Providence Zen Center, USA.

DHARMA COMBAT

Zen Master Hyon Ja (Alma Potter): So I have a question for you. You wrote a book on how to save our planet. That's a little bit too much for me. All I want to know is, who are you going to save first, the Russians or the Ukrainians?

Colin Beavan JDPSN: Kwan Seum Bosal, Kwan Seum Bosal, Kwan Seum Bosal.

ZMHJ: Thank you, thank you.



Question: You might remember a conversation we had when you were giving consulting interviews during the retreat and we spoke during my interview about my difficult relationships with the teachers. As happy as I am for you, I confess to a bit of selfishness. When I saw you on that cushion I felt like I was losing you a bit as a friend, because now you're going across that line to become a teacher. What's going to happen to our friendship, now that you are in this new role?

Beavan PSN: Kelly, I love you. Which side of the line is that?

Q: I love you, too, Colin. Thank you very much.



Question: I don't know you in person, but I was hearing questions and getting from the context that you've been studying Buddhism for many years. How can you dedicate your life for so long to things that you've never seen, like Buddha? I never met him in person.

Beavan PSN: I see you!

Q: [Looks confused.]

Beavan PSN: Just keep that mind.

INKA SPEECH

[Raises the Zen stick over his head, then hits the table with the stick.]

Knowing how to live your life is not knowing how to live your life. Not knowing how to live your life is knowing how to live your life.

[Raises the Zen stick over his head, then hits the table with the stick.]

There is no knowing how to live your life. There is also no not knowing how to live your life.

[Raises the Zen stick over his head, then hits the table with the stick.]

Knowing how to live your life is knowing how to live your life. Not knowing how to live your life is not knowing how to live your life.

Does anyone truly know how to live their life? Does anyone truly not know how to live their life?

KATZ!

Right now I am going to do some more talking. The polite thing for you to do is listen. The polite thing for me to do is keep it short.

Thank you: Zen Master Wu Kwang (Richard Shrobe), Paul Majchrzyk JDPSN, Zen Master Jok Um (Ken Kessel), Zen Master Soeng Hyang (Bobby Rhodes), Zen Master Bon Yeon (Jane Dobisz), Zen Master Hyon Ja (Alma Potter), and Barry Briggs JDPSN. Thank you to all the other teachers in the Kwan Um School of Zen.



Photo: SoYoung Lee

Knowing how to live your life is not knowing how to live your life. Not knowing how to live your life is knowing how to live your life.

When I was in my late twenties, I had already been successful in two careers. I had been a researcher in electrical engineering and got a PhD. I had also run a boutique public relations firm for organizations with a social mission. Supposedly, I knew how to live. But I couldn't understand it. What did any of it mean? How was it important? How would I feel about it all on my deathbed? What was a good life? Where should I live?

Though people thought I knew how to live, I really didn't. I couldn't understand. I remember being scared because I had had a terrible depression in my early twenties and I was scared that I would fall back into a new depression.

I remember distinctly people telling me to let go of my questions because I would drive myself mad. I remember being in a car in Israel in the dark and discussing all this with my father and watching the red glow of his cigarette.

I began to read about Buddhism and mystical Christianity but I was also suspicious of everything I read because I didn't believe anyone else knew how to live either. I couldn't believe any religious writers. This reminds me of something I read recently in a Kwan Um teaching email: Zen Master Seung Sahn held up a cup of orange juice. He said, "This is a cup of orange juice. You keep the orange juice if you have the cup. But if you have no cup, the orange juice has nowhere to stay." Suffering is like that. If you have I-my-me then suffering has a place to stay. But if you are not attached to I-my-me then suffering has nowhere to stay.

These are lovely words, but what I like best is that Zen Master Seung Sahn then said, "Merely understanding these words cannot help you. You have to attain something for yourself."

Back in my late twenties, I was in a dark night of the soul. My knowing how to live had become not knowing how to live. No one else's words could help me. I had to attain something for myself.

There is no knowing how to live your life. There is no not knowing how to live your life.

Around that time, I went to a 12-step meeting in Providence. Someone told me about this Korean Zen master who said, "You must wash your mind with don't-know soap." I loved that. Not "I have something to say to you" but "Don't know and lose all the things that have already been said to you."

I started going to the Kwan Um sitting group on the Brown University campus. After a couple of years I moved to New York City, and I went a few times to my home temple, the Chogye International Zen Center of New York. I didn't like it. There were all these robes and

chanting. I stopped going. But then Zen Master Seung Sahn came to me in a dream. That was the only time I met him. So I went back to the temple.

Before long, I went in for an interview and was given the kong-an "Hyang Eom's Up a Tree." It is only now that I realize how perfect that kong-an was for where I was at. Hyang Eom said, "It is like a man hanging from a tree. He is holding on to a branch by his teeth. His hands and his legs are all tied, so he cannot grasp another branch, and he cannot grasp the trunk of the tree. The only thing that is keeping him alive is clinging by his teeth. Then just at that time somebody comes and asks him, 'Why did Bodhidharma come to China?'"

He is a monk, and his vow is to teach, but if he opens his mouth to answer he will fall to his death. If he doesn't answer, he betrays his nature, his fundamental vow to help all beings.

The question is: How does he stay alive?

The monk clung to life by his teeth. That was like me clinging to trying to figure out how to live. We are like this. We cling to the idea of getting what we want. But first we cling to the idea that we have to figure out what to want. I want something, I just don't know what it is. This is all thinking.

Meanwhile, underneath all that is our fundamental nature. That nature and the nature of the rest of the universe are not two. Deep inside, we know that we want to be kind and we want to help all beings. We don't want to betray that nature. But we get caught up in what we want and wishing we knew how to live. But knowing how to live appears not in each thought but in each situation.

When we are hungry, what? When someone else is hungry, what? When someone needs our teaching and we are all tied up and clinging, what?

Over the last couple of years, my family had a huge crisis. If we said we knew how to deal with it, we wouldn't have been open to what was actually happening and we would have made huge mistakes. On the other hand, if we said we didn't know how to live, we would have been paralyzed. At moments like these, there is neither knowing how to live nor not knowing how to live. Only correctly perceiving your situation and allowing correct function to arise.

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche said, "The bad news is you're falling through the air, nothing to hang on to, no parachute. The good news is, there's no ground."

Knowing how to live is knowing how to live. Not knowing how to live is not knowing how to live.

For whatever reason, as I was writing this speech about knowing how to live or not knowing how to live, I began to think about when my mother asked me how to die. When she was in hospice, she told the social worker that she was a Buddhist, which was news to me. The social worker asked if there was a Buddhist she wanted to talk to. She said, "my son." Yikes.

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Chanting: Moved by Love

Rebecca Otte JDPSN

Some time ago, my husband, who doesn't practice Zen, asked me why we chanted. I began to regurgitate some Zen teaching on the matter, mimicking Zen Master Seung Sahn's words and left it at that, but my answer wasn't satisfactory to me or to him, and so I began to dive more deeply into this practice handed down to us from our Korean teachers.

I've always accepted chanting as a part of our practice, but in my early practice, chanting seemed secondary to sitting meditation. The sangha chanted, and because they chanted, I chanted. I had favorite chants, of course, and some that were hard for me to sit through initially, but I didn't give the matter any thought. It wasn't until later that I began to appreciate that this vocalization gave a different kind of focus for meditation practice. Zen Master Seung Sahn said that we can chant any syllables, and if we believe in them strongly enough, the chanting will be efficacious for our practice, so it isn't just the words we use, but the chanting, the sounds themselves, the vibrations, and the perception of those vibrations that make all the difference.

Zen Master Seung Sahn had clear teaching about chanting meditation. He said that perceiving our voice is the same as perceiving our true nature. He taught that the perceiving itself is our true nature. Each one of us is not separate from the sound, and thus we are not separate from the universe. Further, chanting can keep us centered, and if we perceive the sound of our voice and the voices around us, then we can keep a mind that is clear and compassionate and open. He spoke of our chanting together and perceiving this one voice as the sound of world peace. As we are not separate from the universe, neither are we separate from one another, and chanting is an action that solidifies that oneness. When we perceive the voices of the world and chant together with the world, then that is already peace.

Dae Soen Sa Nim's teaching points to this wonderful sense of unity we can feel in our experience of the sounds we create together. I personally feel this most keenly when chanting the opening lines of the Heart Sutra in English, when the words are slow enough that our voices have time to find just the right tone to merge with the tone of everyone else. The term for this feeling of unity is *kama muta*, Sanskrit for "moved by love." *Kama muta* is the feeling we get when we have a sudden feeling of oneness or union with others. *Kama muta* happens when our voices blend and the sense of separateness dissipates.

There was a recent video on Facebook of two groups brought together by Koolulam, an organization that seeks to bring Israelis together for mass singing events. In this

video, three thousand Muslims and Jews, none of whom knew each other, were taught the song "One Day" by Matisyahu. In one hour, they were taught the song and the harmonization. It was then recorded and uploaded to YouTube. The results were stunning. Singing together, there was no heartbreak or dissension. There was just the beauty of the music they were making together. There was only the sound of the voices harmonizing together. And as they sang, they began to move to the rhythm of the music, many hands lifted up, and you could see the joy in their faces. The comments on Facebook were full of heart healing and compassion. When the COVID pandemic caused a lockdown in Italy, videos emerged of Italian neighbors coming out onto their balconies and singing together. There was this sense of "We are all in this together." How is it that music can be so powerful in bringing us together?

Singing and chanting together was recognized from the very beginnings of ancient spiritual practices as a way of creating community and bringing the mysterious into our present experience. Nearly every religious tradition utilizes singing or chanting in their rites of passage and rituals of worship. Vedic chants from the Hindu tradition are nearly four thousand years old, making it likely that the Buddha also chanted or was familiar with chanting. And the Buddha's teachings were passed down in an oral tradition—probably through the use of chanting. Throughout the Lotus Sutra or the Avatamsaka Sutra, we find the speaker changing from prose to a verse, or *gatha*. I suspect that these verse forms were used to memorize and chant the sutras, thus passing the teaching from one person to another, one generation to another. We continue that oral tradition every practice when we chant the Heart Sutra.

Although the beginnings of vocalization practice were perhaps intuited by our spiritual forebears, science underscores the reasons why it's been so important in our rituals and forms. Chanting together stimulates the release of oxytocin—a neuropeptide that is sometimes characterized as the "love hormone" and is associated with empathy, trust, and relationship building. The sound of our voices blending brings forth that sense of community, of unity. While we are chanting in unison, we are also in time together—in sync with one another. In the book *How God Changes Your Brain* (Random House, 2009), Andrew Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman write about how this synchronicity in moving, chanting, or singing is shown in psychological research to bring forth our innate compassion and empathy for one another. Chanting together in unison creates world peace because we are, in essence, co-creating a milieu in which compassion, generosity, and empathy for others

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See You Next Time in Another Theater of Life: A Biographical Tribute to Bo Haeng Sunim

Won Bo Sunim

Editor's Note

Bo Haeng Sunim, our senior monk from Lithuania, passed away suddenly during the early morning of April 22 at Hwa Gye Sa Temple in Seoul. He was known and deeply respected by sangha members in all of our Kwan Um School regions. Below is a tribute by a sister Lithuanian nun. —Bop Yo Sunim, Editor for Asia

Bo Haeng Sunim often talked about death—it was an interesting topic to him. His deep understanding of the fleeting nature of life inspired him to practice hard, never thinking about resting or skipping even small parts of practice. On one of the occasions when he and I talked about death, he joked that after he died, I should do a monodrama about his life. He even explained several technical details such as lighting. But I think there was no better actor than Bo Haeng Sunim, both in the theater and in real life. He played his role perfectly to the very last moment.

20] Bo Haeng Sunim was born in 1961 in Lithuania. He started practicing with the Kwan Um School in 1989. He received five precepts from Zen Master Seung Sahn's student Do Am Sunim in 1991. He first met our founding teacher in 1991 during a visit to Lithuania. He actively participated in the creation of the first Zen centers in Kaunas and Vilnius. In December 1999 he left for South Korea to become a monk. He became a novice monk in 2001 with Dae Bong Sunim as his unsa sunim, or ordination teacher, and in 2003 he received sami (novice) precepts in the Chogye Order. He received bhikkhu precepts in 2005. He truly valued being a part of Kwan Um School

of Zen and the Chogye Order and succeeded to combine these two types of trainings to help others. He was a monk who put practice above everything. During the twenty years of his monastic life, he never missed a three-month Kyol Che—in total he attended forty of them.

Bo Haeng Sunim was active in spreading Buddhism in Lithuania. He wrote two books—*Nabi: Or, the Theater of Life*, was published in 2021, and *Letters from Dragon Mountain* was published in 2010 and has been reprinted three times. At the 2018 International Vilnius Book Fair

(the biggest book fair in the Baltic region), it was recognized by the Lithuanian Writers' Union as the best spiritual book by a Lithuanian author. After it was published, Bo Haeng Sunim traveled throughout Lithuania, teaching in different cities. Thanks to his efforts, several new Zen groups were created. He gave public lectures at universities and libraries. He also regularly visited Lithuanian prisons, where he taught prisoners meditation and other spiritual practices.

In 2011, with the actress-director Egle Mikulionyte, he staged the play *The Golden Temple*, based on Yukio Mishima's novel of the same name, in which he played the lead role. The performance was shown more than twenty times in various places in Lithuania. It was extremely popular; every performance was filled, and there was always a shortage of tickets. In 2016, Bo Haeng Sunim staged and performed his own improvisational drama, *Letters from the Monastery*, based on his autobiographical book, *Letters from Dragon Mountain*. This performance was well received by the public, and he did more than fifteen such meditative evenings.

Bo Haeng Sunim was the main promoter of Korean culture in Lithuania. One of his most famous projects took place in 2012, inviting *pansori* singer Park In Hee to represent this unique Korean heritage in Lithuania. He also organized several exhibitions of Sol Chong Kun Sunim's calligraphies in the biggest cities of Lithuania.

Almost every spring or autumn, Bo Haeng Sunim organized three-day kido chanting retreats. In total, he organized about sixteen kidos in various parts of Lithuania from 2011 to 2019, with many Lithuanian people joining.

He was an inspiration for countless people to follow Buddhist practice. Also he was admired and loved by many people who were from different religious backgrounds.

Good-bye Bo Haeng Sunim!

See you next time in another theater of life! ♦

Won Bo Sunim is a Lithuanian nun who lives at Poep Ryon Sa Temple. She took novice precepts in 2002 and received full bhikkhuni ordination in 2007, both at Jik Ji Sa Temple.



Photo: Courtesy of Musangsa

What Can We Do?

Laura Otto-Salaj

Adapted from a dharma talk given at Great Lake Zen Center, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

The other day, I came across an article in the New York Times by Amanda Gorman, written for the anniversary of President Biden's inauguration. The title was, "Why I Almost Didn't Read My Poem at the Inauguration."

In this article, Amanda talked about how she had been afraid. She didn't want to disappoint so many people with her poem. COVID-19 was raging, and young people couldn't be vaccinated yet, so she remained unvaccinated. And there was the issue of the January 6 assault on the US Capitol building, which is where the ceremony was going to take place—at the time, there were rumors of another insurrection being planned for the day of the inauguration. So, there was a lot of noise in Amanda's head about the ceremony. She had friends telling her to buy a bulletproof vest, and her mom had her crouch in the living room, so that she could practice shielding Amanda's body from bullets. She said someone she loves warned her to "be ready to die" if she went to the Capitol, telling her, "It's just not worth it." She had insomnia and nightmares, and barely ate or drank for days. She really focused on this decision she needed to make, and so many voices were telling her not to go.

The night before she needed to tell the inaugural committee her decision, she was up all night, listening to the quiet of her neighborhood in the early morning. It hit her: she said, "Maybe being brave enough doesn't mean lessening my fear but listening to it." She said she closed her eyes and voiced all her fears. In doing this, she found that what worried her the most was that, if she didn't go to the inauguration and read her poem, she would spend the rest of her life wondering what she could have done with the poem—what she could have accomplished. Her poem was not for her.

Amanda's conundrum resonates with me. My father has been diagnosed with mild cognitive impairment—a precursor to Alzheimer's Disease. His father had it, and his father's father before him. But, this is *my* father, which brings with it a new level of fear I've not felt before. Moving forward, there are many decisions to be made, and it is not always clear which ones are the best. Sometimes, it is easy to get stuck in not acting because of fear of what might happen. How can I not let my attachment to him and fear of what may come get in the way of helping him? Many of us have similar fears and complicated lives.

There is a lot of unrest in the world right now. Sometimes it feels to us like things have never been more unstable in this lifetime, and that there is a lot to fear—the

world seems very complex. But the truth is, there has always been bad news. The first noble truth tells us that life is suffering, and the second noble truth says that suffering is created by mind alone. Human beings are like this—the Buddha taught that we lose sight of the forest of just this moment for the trees of desire, anger, and ignorance. We make things even more complicated than they are.

But where there is bad news, there is also good news. The third noble truth tells us that we can do something about this suffering, and the fourth noble truth points us to the eightfold path, one step of which is right action. So, *action is really important*—it is covered in not one, but two of the four noble truths.

There is a Zen parable, which goes something like this:

One night there was a severe snowstorm in the province where a Zen monastery was located. In the morning, the disciples of the monastery woke to find the snow was waist deep. They trudged through the snow to the meditation hall for morning practice. At the door of the meditation hall, they were greeted by the Zen master. He asked, "Tell me, what should be done now?"

One disciple said, "We should all meditate on thawing so that the snow melts."

Another disciple said, "We should wait in our rooms and allow the snow to take its natural course."

The third disciple said, "The one who saw the truth does not care if there is snow or not."

The Zen master looked at the students and sighed. "Now listen to what I will say. Each of you take a shovel and off you go." Not so complicated—just this moment, action cuts through thinking. Just shovel snow.

Yesterday, the clear and respected teacher Thich Nhat Hanh died at the age of ninety-five. Many people talk about him as the "father of engaged Buddhism." About that, he said, "To say 'engaged Buddhism' is redundant. How can it be Buddhism if it is not engaged?" He also said, "My actions are my only true belongings." Zen Master Seung Sahn often taught, "Just do it"—we hear this all the time in our school. Sometimes we let our emotions or attachments get in the way of action, like being afraid of failure, embarrassment, or that the outcome won't be what we *want*. We say we're too busy, or we let the inertia of inaction take over by doing nothing, which is a choice in itself. Practice is so important, because it allows us to see clearly the roots of suffering and cut them off through action—in spite of fear, or lethargy, or other issues that can get in the way of doing our job of helping others.

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Situation Yellow, Situation Red: Developing a Well-Being Toolbox

Mat Wooller

Adapted from a dharma talk given via Zoom to the Empty Gate Zen Center, October 20, 2021.

Welcome. I am Mat Wooller, also known as Ho Shim. I'm a dharma teacher here in Fairbanks, Alaska, where I live with my wife, Diane, and my two kids, Owen (fifteen years old) and Phoebe (twelve). I work as a professor here at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, teaching chemistry and studying mammoths, among other things. I feel tremendously grateful for our good situation.

I would like to start my talk by acknowledging the land on which I am sitting here today in interior Alaska. I want to express my sincere thanks to the Dené and Lower Tanana people and their ancestors, who have taken such good care of this land and everything on it for longer than ten thousand years. Generations of care by indigenous people have undoubtedly influenced our good situation here in Alaska today. Although I moved to this place from the UK, both of my delightful kids were born in the local hospital situated on this land in Alaska. My situation here in Fairbanks also benefits from the presence of the Cold Mountain Zen Center, led by my good friend Cary de Wit. This Zen center accommodates the practice of my lovely sangha (near and far, in person and online), for whom I am most grateful. Our Cold Mountain Zen Center in turn benefits from a rich connection with the Empty Gate Zen Center in California and our guiding teacher, Zen Master Bon Soeng. My own situation has benefited tremendously from Zen Master Bon Soeng's guidance, wisdom, teachings, and dear friendship—I feel very lucky and thankful. I also feel that the connections between these two Zen centers have only strengthened and been enriched during the pandemic—connections I can best describe as a feeling of love.

A favorite Zen saying of mine, which is also a favorite with my family too, is “A good situation is a bad situation, and a bad situation is a good situation.” This saying allows me to tell my second-favorite Zen story.

A long time ago in China there was once a farmer who owned a fine horse. But one day the horse escaped. His neighbors came over right away and said “Your horse has escaped and gotten lost; how unlucky you are.” To this the farmer just said “Maybe.” Then one day the horse returned, but this time followed by a bunch of wild horses. The neighbors came over again and this time said “Oh, now you have your horse back along with ten more horses—you are so lucky.” The farmer just said “Maybe.” The farmer's son then set about trying to tame the wild horses but one day got thrown from one of them and broke his leg. The neighbors came over again and said “Oh no, your son broke his leg and can't help you—how unlucky you are.” The farmer re-

plied, “Maybe.” Then one day the army came by the town and conscripted all the young men to go off and fight in a war—but they did not take the farmer's son because he had a broken leg.

In my mind, there actually is no end to this story, with the life of the farmer likely oscillating between perceived “good” and “bad” situations. Our own lives and situations can be like this—time passes, and what was bad can turn into good and good can turn into bad. What was perceived to be bad can on reflection appear good. Good outcomes can also sometimes arise from bad events.

On reflection, this has been true in my own life, and in some ways was my entry point into practicing Zen. About fifteen years ago, I experienced some game-changing and challenging events that resulted in me butting heads with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)—a “bad” situation. I am certain I am not the only one here today who has had some experience with PTSD. Part of my recovery was to stumble into the Cold Mountain Zen Center here in Alaska and to try healing through meditation and our range of Zen practices, which serve what I like to think of as a well-being toolbox. This has been a game-changing “good” situation that I may never have stumbled into if it had not been for the accompanying and prior “bad” situation.

On reflection, having been practicing Zen for well over a decade now since experiencing PTSD, I can see the “untangling” or “settling” that has occurred in my own mind. When my kids were younger, we used to use a clear plastic bottle filled with glitter to help them learn to calm their minds. When they were angry or upset we would sit with them and shake up the glitter in the bottle, and the glitter would swirl around. We would set the bottle down in front of us, watching the glitter settle as we would shift our attention to slowing our breathing. Often we would both calm down. This can be what I sometimes experience each time when I practice meditation. But over time it feels like there has been some long-term settling, healing, and calming that has occurred since first experiencing PTSD. Although sitting, walking, and chanting meditation have become the cornerstone of my own well-being practice, I recognize that my recovery from PTSD and ongoing well-being has benefited from the diverse toolbox available to me, including paying attention to diet and physical activity, implementing kindness and gratitude—helped by reciting my precepts each day—and practicing good sleep hygiene. For many, myself included, some form of trauma-informed counseling is also an important part of this well-being toolbox.

Meditation, along with this well-being toolbox, have even become part of a for-credit class I developed and now teach at the university here on the science and practice of happiness and well-being. This class has benefited from the guidance and support of a wide range of others from many different disciplines, and from other institutions where similar classes have been developed and are now being taught.

Recently, my practice has involved a three-month retreat—not a retreat away from my family responsibilities and situation, but a retreat nonetheless. The retreat tightened my formal practice and wove practice more strongly into the regular demands of life.

Part of this retreat involved my reading through the Diamond Sutra. The Diamond Sutra starts with a beautiful, calm description of the Buddha returning from begging for food to then settle down on a cushion and to then be approached by a group of his followers. Once settled, a senior follower asked what it takes to become a bodhisattva. And so the sutra begins, which is largely considered to be an education in no-self—which to be honest, I have found dense.

But there are a lot of little treasures along the way, including some commentary on what is a bodhisattva's situation. The commentary on the Diamond Sutra in the version I own talks of the bodhisattva as "Anyone who ceaselessly seeks unexcelled, perfect enlightenment as well as the happiness and welfare of all beings." I liked this definition when I came across it because I feel we can all aim to be this bodhisattva. We don't need to have anything—we just need to be seeking, trying to benefit the well-being of others. Best of all, I now see the bodhisattva path as a positive feedback loop, where care for others feeds back to promote one's own healthy well-being.

In the lengthy commentary on the sutra, it is made clear that the Buddha was not only teaching monks and nuns, but lay practitioners too—folks like me and many of you—weaving practice into and making it part of our everyday lives. I found this view and words to be like an encouraging crowd cheering me on during my retreat.

In his book *The Diamond That Cuts through Illusion*, Thich Nhat Hanh also provided commentary on the sutra that I found encouraging.

If we are washing dishes and thinking of others who are enjoying themselves doing nothing, we cannot enjoy washing the dishes. We may have a few clean dishes afterwards, but our happiness is smaller than one teaspoon. If however, we wash the dishes with a serene mind, our happiness will be boundless. This is already liberation.

How we see our own situation is important.

The sutra is also considered to be a message and reminder that the path involves moving beyond arbitrary distinctions. So perhaps that favorite saying of mine—"A good situation is a bad situation, and a bad situation is a good situation"—is useful, but it might also be a little misleading. Perhaps there

are no good or bad situations, but rather a seamless continuum of inseparable moments. Perhaps rather than attempting to label situations, it might be more helpful to see the phrase as guiding us toward more openness and inquisitiveness of each moment and each new situation.

In our own Zen school, I have heard Zen Master Soeng Hyang encourage the use of the wonderful and simple question "What is this?" as we approach each moment and situation. I have found this to be such a useful and great tool in the toolbox—a way to approach almost any situation. I use it to question and tease apart my emotions and feelings, and have been surprised sometimes by what appears. Fear and anger are some of my favorites to use this tool on—what seems obvious on first approaching these situations often is much different when I have used this tool.

In a wonderful interview I had with Barry Briggs JDPSN years ago, the whole interview and teaching centered on encouraging me to pose the question "How may I help?" I can still hear Barry's infectious laughter as I stumbled and laughed through kong-an after kong-an. His teaching in this encounter was purely devoted to encouraging my knee-jerk response of "How may I help?" This was another wonderful tool for me to use as I approach situations, such as fear and anger. When anger arises in response to another person's words or actions, a momentary pause to silently ask "How may I help you?" quickly softens the mind and results in a more compassionate approach to the situation, and sometimes even a swifter resolution. The real challenge is to *remember* to do this when it is so easy to get caught up in the sparkly bottle that becomes the angry mind. This is where our *practice* is great—making the process much more instinctive—like developing a muscle memory in the mind.

And then there is the wonderful teaching about approaching situations by Zen Master Seung Sahn: "When yellow comes only yellow, when red comes only red." So we have many tools to approach and appreciate our constantly changing situations.

Thank you for listening to me this evening—I really appreciate your attention. How is your situation right now? ♦

Mat(theu) Wooller (he/him/his) is originally from the UK and has lived in Fairbanks, Alaska, for about twenty years with his family. Mat has taken sixteen precepts, but is still awaiting an in-person ceremony to become a senior dharma teacher with the Cold Mountain Zen Center in Fairbanks. Dr. Wooller is also a professor at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, where he has developed an interest in helping lead the promotion of happiness and well-being on campus. At the university, he leads an in-person and online practice space called "the Well" (<https://sites.google.com/alaska.edu/thewell/home>), which is devoted to promoting happiness and well-being. He also developed and teaches a for-credit class (both online and in-person) on the science and practice of happiness and well-being to students, staff, and faculty. This secular class includes meditation as part of a broad well-being toolbox.

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meant strong enough to stay on the path and not get swallowed up by mental demons.

In my time spent in close proximity with Zen Master Seung Sahn, there were a number of times that great teaching came from him directly to me. One example: A number of us were sitting outside having a picnic lunch with Dae Soen Sa Nim on the Zen center grounds on a hot summer afternoon. I was recovering but still felt unsteady. He looked across at me and said, "Your consciousness jumping around." He then imitated a little bag of consciousness, like a little bird, swooshing around above my head. I laughed. That was exactly what was happening. It was such a relief to see that and understand it. While it did not immediately cure that problem, it took the mythology and intimidation out of it. I began to tell the difference between the state of presence in which consciousness was grounded, and I felt strong and down to earth, versus the states of unsteadiness in which thinking was so intense that I felt I left my body and was outside of it. That's probably the origin of idioms like "He was beside himself with rage."

I continued living at Providence Zen Center for another four and a half years, gaining strength and equanimity in the process, which eventually allowed me to move to Boston and enter the business world. Eventually I got married to my soulmate and teacher. We had a son, and I am continuing

my practice, always with my wife, who is also on the path of liberation from the ego. I am grateful to my great Zen Master Seung Sahn, who pulled me out of the fire and set me on the right way. Thank you, Dae Soen Sa Nim.

One afterword: One of the prerequisites for successfully practicing transforming out of despair into balance is having a strong community behind you. I could not have asked for a more supportive group than my teachers and fellow Zen students at the Providence Zen Center from 1980 to 1984.

I fondly and gratefully remember the insightful teaching and solid support that came from George Bowman (Zen Master Bo Mun), who took me under his wing and lifted me up. And Bobby Rhodes (Zen Master Soeng Hyang) and Linc Rhodes JDPSN, who provided great wisdom and solid realism. And I fondly remember Louise Sichel, the head dharma teacher, who kindly put up with the sweat-stained bowing mats. And Shana and Davy Klinger, and Fred Rosen and Sam Rose, Jim Pallett, Domi Stauber, Tony Sager, and a host of others! ♦

Sol Sandperl has studied Zen Buddhism for a number of years in a Zen monastery in Japan and in the Providence and Cambridge Zen centers. He works as a sales manager in a chemical company. He lives in Massachusetts with his wife, Marilyn, and son, Joe.

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One day, I asked her if there was anything she wanted to discuss. Her eyes snapped open. "Yes," she said. "I want you to tell me how to die."

We talked a little and then she said, "You seem like you have it all together."

She cried a bit. I said, "Are you crying because you wish you had it all together?" She said yes. She was falling from an infinite height to an infinite depth and she didn't know how to live or how to die.

She cried some more. She said, "Do you? Do you have it all together?"

I said, "I don't think that quite reflects my experience. I often wake with anxiety and worry about money. I feel lonely because I have no partner . . ." (I do now, though.) I said, "But I do have a certain peace with my humanity. I don't fight the fact that I don't have it all together. I think I am largely OK with not having it all together."

"What does that mean?" she asked.

I said, "I don't think any of us completely 'have it all together.' We are all struggling with being human. If no one has it all together, in a certain way, that means all of us do have it all together. Not having it all together, if you are human, is in fact having it all together."

She fell asleep then. Something I'd said had relaxed her. I think I gave her permission not to know how live, not to know how to die. I think telling her that that was the human condition made her feel she no longer had to fight.

We fight it, but it's OK not to know. In fact, not know-

ing is our original condition. Stop fighting. Let go. There is nothing to fight. Everything is just like this. We can relax. We have arrived because we never left.

But merely understanding these words cannot help us. We must each attain something for ourselves.

[Raises the Zen stick over his head, then hits the table with the stick.]

Zen Master Bon Haeng (Mark Houghton) once said to me, "Our practice is about becoming comfortable with not knowing." Is that knowing how to live?

[Raises the Zen stick over his head, then hits the table with the stick.]

Zen Master Soeng Hyang (Bobby Rhodes) once said to me, "Let me give you the best advice you'll ever get. At the moment of your death, ask, 'How can I help?'" Is that knowing how to die?

[Raises the Zen stick over his head, then hits the table with the stick.]

Not knowing, is that life or is that death?

KATZ!

Thank you for listening to me. I hope I didn't go on too long. With any luck, those of us at Providence Zen Center will soon be eating cake! I hope cake appears for those of you on Zoom, too! ♦

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becomes a reality.

Chanting also helps us with our sitting meditation. If you've ever just sat down on your cushion without some chanting prior to it, you can tell the difference. I could sense that in my own practice, and so always included one or two chants before my sitting practice at home. At a retreat a few years ago, one of my teachers said that he believed chanting helped us settle into our sitting meditation. The word *settle* caught my attention. Settling in this context connotes "coming to rest" or "sinking into." It was interesting to learn that chanting increases serotonin levels, which stabilizes our mood—lessening anxiety and bringing calmness to our heart and mind. Sarah Keating writes in "The World's Most Accessible Stress Reliever" (BBC, May 2020) that cortisol levels also decrease with chanting, letting our muscles relax and slowing our heart rate. The deep, diaphragmatic breathing often required of chanting increases vagal nerve tone, which slows the beating of our heart and lowers our blood pressure. Because of these physiological changes, chanting helps us come to rest in our sitting meditation practice with more focus and concentration. Newberg and Waldman also point out that even doing a quiet mantra has been shown to activate areas of the brain that decrease anxiety and increase our connection to others.

None of this will help, though, without some effort. Many of us have had the experience of chanting on

autopilot while our brains have taken us in all different directions and then suddenly we're at the end of the chant. Or sometimes we end up repeating verses or skipping verses—and suddenly everyone in the sangha is confused! Zen Master So Sahn in the *Mirror of Zen* cautions us against chanting in a pro forma manner: "Merely chanting with the lips is nothing more than recitation of the Buddha's name. Chanting with a one-pointed mind is true chanting. Just mouthing the words without mindfulness, absorbed in habitual thinking, will do no real good for your practice." As with all meditation practice, we must bring our attention back over and over again to the chant, the sound of our voice and the sounds of the voices around us. Zen Master Dae Bong said, "If there is any kind of thinking, any kind of feeling, or any kind of thing going on, take that energy and put it into the sound. Then there is no thinking at all, only the sound."

Chanting is a wonderful practice both in together action and when practicing alone. The energy of strong together action in chanting upholds us, bonds us, and soothes the heat of our passions and thinking mind. The solitary chants or mantras at dawn bring centeredness to the day. The sound of chanting carries into the room and out into the world, touching lives with the compassion of Kwan Seum Bosal or the blessings of the Great Dharani. ♦

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(Continued from p. 21)

Amanda Gorman said in her article: "Fear can be love trying its best in the dark." The darkness of desire, anger, and ignorance, of attachment to emotion, can be cut through with practice. With practice, we can reveal our Buddha nature and use it to act—to help.

Ultimately, Amanda realized that there was nothing else to do but to go to the inauguration. She said, "I can't say I was completely confident in my choice, but I was completely committed to it." She made a choice to just do it, 100 percent. Many of us have had times in our lives when there was nothing else to do but have great faith in our actions, even if we were uncertain of the outcome. In our school, we're fortunate to have a lot of resources to help us attain clear direction—online sangha and practice, local Zen centers, the teachings of the Buddha and our teachers, and so on. All of these provide direction so we can see the moment clearly, "try try try" and not be attached to the result. I'm afraid of what the future will bring for my dad. However, practice helps me transcend the fear of what may come, and see in each moment how to help him and our family as we move with his experience. Each time, we see what happens next, and just do it again.

And that is complete.

Right now, we are practicing Heart Kyol Che, our winter period of intense practice. During this time, we can focus on the opportunity to enhance our practice in many ways. One of the ways in which we can practice is being mindful that our job is to help others: How can we use our practice to attain just this moment, so that we can "be engaged," to help? Please keep this in mind as we practice today, and through Heart Kyol Che. And, thank you all for practicing so diligently. ♦

Senior dharma teacher Laura Otto-Salaj began practice with the Original Root Zen Center in Racine, WI, in 1992, and assisted with the start and development of the Milwaukee Zen Group (now the Great Lake Zen Center) in 1993. Trained as a social psychologist, she spent many years at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee conducting research on the intersection of sexual risk behavior, addiction, and trauma, and also training doctoral and masters level students in social work and research methods before retiring in 2020. She currently practices with the Great Lake Zen Center in Milwaukee.

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The heart of the Kwan Um School of Zen is our practice. Zen Master Seung Sahn very simply taught "Don't Know". This

means in each moment we open unconditionally to all that presents itself to us. By doing this, our innate wisdom and compassion will naturally breathe and flow into our lives.

The Zen centers of the Kwan Um School of Zen around the world offer training in Zen meditation through instruction, daily morning and evening meditation practice, public talks, teaching interviews, retreats, workshops, and community living. Our programs are open to anyone regardless of previous experience.

The School's purpose is to make this practice of Zen as accessible as possible. It is our wish to help human beings find their true direction and we vow and to save all beings from suffering.

Becoming a Member in the Americas

Your membership in a participating center or group makes you a part of the Kwan Um School of Zen sangha (Buddhist Community). Your dues help support teaching activities on local, national, and international levels. Membership benefits include discounted rates at all retreats and workshops at KUSZ member Zen centers and a subscription to Primary Point Magazine. *(In other parts of the world, contact your local affiliated Zen center or regional head temple.)*

To set up a membership with your credit card, visit <https://americas.kwanumzen.org/membership>

1. Please choose an American Zen Center (see preceding pages). If you are not located near a Zen Center, you may become a member of the head temple, Providence Zen Center.

2. Please indicate a membership level and choose payment schedule
 - a. Family _____ \$480 yearly _____ \$120 quarterly
 - b. Individual _____ \$360 yearly _____ \$90 quarterly
 - c. Student/Senior (65+) _____ \$240 yearly _____ \$60 quarterly

3. Please print your contact information

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Phone _____ Email _____

For Family Memberships, two adults and children up to age 26 in the same household are included in your membership. Please list names below.

Send to: Membership: Kwan Um School of Zen, 99 Pound Road, Cumberland, RI 02864

If you have any questions, contact the office at 401-658-1476 or email us at membership@kwanumzen.org

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